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## Global Stories of Young Adults in the Coronavirus Pandemic

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# Global Stories of Young Adults in the Coronavirus Pandemic



Scott D'Attilio - Jeremy Gagnon - Chenxi Li - Andrew Ressler  
Advisors: Prof. Uma Kumar, Prof. Ingrid Shockey  
May 13, 2020

# Global Stories of Young Adults in the Coronavirus Pandemic

An Interactive Qualifying Project  
submitted to the Faculty of  
WORCESTER POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Bachelor of Science

by  
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Date:  
13 May 2020

Report Submitted to:

Kim Denisa  
WPI Global Lab

<https://global-lab.wpi.edu/new-research-and-projects/covid-19-2/>

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*This report represents work of WPI undergraduate students submitted to the faculty as evidence of a degree requirement. WPI routinely publishes these reports on its web site without editorial or peer review. For more information about the projects program at WPI, see <http://www.wpi.edu/Academics/Projects>*

## **Abstract**

The voices of young adults often go unheard, and this was no different during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. We collected stories and perspectives from young adults from March to May during the crisis, using Zoom interviews in addition to weekly surveys. Their stories revealed consistent themes about loss and resilience. These findings were then presented in a multimedia, online deliverable in association with the WPI Global Lab.

## Authors



**Scott D'Attilio:** Hello there. My name is Scott D'Attilio, and I'm from Boxford, Massachusetts. I am currently studying aerospace engineering here at WPI. This IQP has been an interesting experience to say the least. In my picture you can see my workstation, where I do all of my meetings, and where I conduct all of my interviews. Working entirely online was quite the challenge, but we were able to work through it and come out with a project that brings a lot of perspective to the situation that otherwise may have been lost.

**Jeremy Gagnon:** Hey, my name is Jeremy Gagnon and I'm from Takoma Park, Maryland. I'm an aerospace engineering major at WPI and have recently moved back to my off-campus apartment in Worcester. Since this all started I've stopped working my part time jobs at Doordash and D'Angelo's because my girlfriend works in elder care, which has left me with a lot of time on my hands. Fortunately this IQP has given me some interesting work to occupy myself with through these dull and isolated times.



**Chenxi Li:** Hello everybody, I am Chenxi Li, but people usually call me Checic. I'm from Changchun, a city in northeast China in between Russia and Korea, and now I live in Holyoke, Massachusetts. I study Mechanical Engineering at WPI. During the pandemic, I have heard a lot of different perspectives from my Chinese and American friends, which makes me more interested in people's perspectives in other cultures.

**Andrew Ressler:** Hi everyone, my name is Andrew Ressler. I'm from North Reading, Massachusetts, and I've also lived in Maryland and Germany. I'm studying bioinformatics and computer science at WPI. While living at home during this pandemic, I've spent my free time reading, playing piano, and going for short hikes near my house. Getting to hear the stories of others through my IQP has been fascinating.





## Authorship

This paper was written collaboratively by all four authors, with most sections having been written by multiple people. We therefore attribute the authorship of the entire paper to the whole team. A few specific roles are discussed below.

Scott D’Attilio: The abstract and executive summary were written by Scott.

Jeremy Gagnon: Large portions of Chapter 5 were written mainly by Jeremy.

Andrew Ressler: Most of the editing work was done by Andrew, who also contributed several figures.

Chenxi Li: Checic created many of the graphics in the paper.



*The team in our natural coronavirus environment. We have adjusted to collaborating though Zoom over the past couple months.*

# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>Authors .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Authorship .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Table of Contents .....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Table of Figures.....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>Executive Summary .....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>Background .....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>Approach .....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>Results .....</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>Recommendation and Conclusion .....</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 2: Literature Review .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2.1 The Social Transformation From COVID-19 .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2.2 Government Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2.3 The Impact of Age.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2.4 Divergent Profiles.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Chapter 3: Methodology.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>3.1 Collect Narratives from Young Adults Relating to the Pandemic.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>3.2 Identify Shared and Changing perspectives .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>3.3 Create a Multimedia Platform Deliverable .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Chapter 4: Results.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>4.1 Objective 1: Collection of Narratives .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>4.2 Objective 2: Identify Shared Perspectives in Real-Time.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>4.3 Objective 3: Create a Multimedia Display .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>4.4 Discussion.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Chapter 5: Recommendations and Conclusion .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>5.1 Recommendations .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>5.2 Conclusion .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>22</b>

<b>Appendices.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Appendix A: Consent Form for Interview.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Appendix B: Sample Interview Questions (English) .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Appendix C: Sample Interview Questions for a Student (German).....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Appendix D: Sample Survey Questions .....</b>	<b>28</b>



## Table of Figures

<i>Figure 1: Flattening the Curve (Adapted from CDC / The Economist, 2020).....</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Figure 2: Many small businesses have been hit hard by the coronavirus response (Pymnts, 2020).....</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Figure 3: Temperature checkpoint outside of residential area in China (Caro, 2020).....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Figure 4: Coronavirus Statistics from John Hopkins University.....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Figure 5: President Trump addresses the country on the coronavirus for the first time (CNN, 2020) .....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Figure 6: The different lives between Isabel Canning (left) and Tatiana Lathion (right) during pandemic (Casey, 2020).....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Figure 7: Zoom interview in session, Interviewee from Germany (left), and team member (right). .....</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Figure 8: Interviewees from Maryland (left) and California (right). Compilations of zoom interviews create a collage of young people trapped inside. ....</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Figure 9: Countries where interviewees resided during the pandemic .....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Figure 10: U.S. states (and D.C.) where interviewees resided during the pandemic .....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Figure 11: Treemap of interviewees' occupations .....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Figure 12: A shopper and cashier both wear masks at Pat's Farm grocery store (WWNYTV, 2020) .....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Figure 13: Airport worker in a hazmat suit in Fuzhou, China, on March 16, 2020 (Caro, 2020).....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Figure 14: Interviewees' average self-health evaluation and their thoughts on seriousness of COVID-19 each week, on a scale from 0 to 100. ....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Figure 15: Global timeline of the pandemic alongside our project's timeline .....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Figure 16: People waiting in line for a food bank (Axios, 2020) .....</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Figure 17: Being trapped inside has been causing people to be irritable or restless (Loren's World, 2018).....</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Figure 18: A virtual graduation of new doctors at UMass Medical School (UMass Medical School, 2020).....</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Figure 19: WPI Global Lab COVID-19 Page (<a href="https://global-lab.wpi.edu/new-research-and-projects/covid-19-2/">https://global-lab.wpi.edu/new-research-and-projects/covid-19-2/</a>).20</i>	

# Executive Summary

## Introduction

This project documents the experiences of young adults living through the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic began in late December of 2019, when the first cases started appearing in China. Within 3 months, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic (CDC, 2020). In order to slow the spread of the disease, society had to change rapidly: stay at home orders, quarantines, social distancing measures, and supply shortages all became realities. Under these circumstances, young, college-aged adults made dramatic changes and dealt with new realities along with everyone else, but their perspective was often overlooked in the story of the pandemic. In order to redress this and to hear these experiences, we documented the stories of young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic through online interviews and surveys. To summarize our findings, we identified ideas or rhetoric shared across multiple interviews. We identified ideas and shared rhetoric across consecutive interviews with the idea of creating a multimedia platform to present our findings.

## Background

COVID-19 is a novel coronavirus, which may have spread to humans from bats (CDC, 2020). (Hereafter, the term “Coronavirus” refers exclusively to COVID-19.) The respiratory illness caused by COVID-19 ranges in severity, with age being the biggest risk factor. In the United States, around 80% of fatalities are people older than 65 (CDC, 2020). This age discrepancy has been a large focus in media coverage of the pandemic. Because of the high risk to a significant portion of the population, immediate action was necessary to limit the spread as much as possible. This strategy was termed “flattening the curve,” with the curve being the number of active cases.

With the adoption of this new mentality of flattening the curve, big differences in sanitation and protective measures arose. The CDC recommended masks, or, at a minimum, cloth face covers in public places to avoid individuals unknowingly spreading the disease (CDC, 2020). Many businesses temporarily closed or were required to close by national or local orders. Businesses that remained open started taking their own measures to protect their workers by putting up barriers to separate cashiers from customers and requiring frequent handwashing by employees.

## Approach

The goal of this project was to document the stories and perspectives of young adults during the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic of 2020. To pursue our goal, we identified three essential objectives of this project:

1. Collect and document narratives from young adults (18-24) relating to their experience of the pandemic.

## Executive Summary

2. Identify shared and changing perspectives in real-time as the pandemic develops.
3. Create a film and/or multimedia platform to document the stories and experiences of young adults during the coronavirus pandemic.

We identified and subsequently interviewed thirty-eight young adults (18-24), around ten by each member of the project group. Each interviewee was someone that a team member knew personally. This personal connection made it easier for the interviewee to open up and give detailed answers. We included individuals of varied backgrounds: students from different colleges, as well as young people not in college, and essential workers who continued working in lockdowns. We also sourced internationally, ensuring a diversity of perspectives.

## Results

The interviews and surveys we collected contributed many interesting stories from young adults all over the world, with many shared patterns in the perspective and rhetoric of our interviewees. We collected narratives from thirty-eight young adults ranging in age between 18 and 24, and from countries including China, Denmark, Germany, India, Indonesia, New Zealand, Russia, Sweden, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Those in the U.S. hailed from twelve different states and the District of Columbia.

The first round of narratives showed many commonalities, highlighting fear, uncertainty, and personal decision-making. Each interviewee had to navigate a different situation: with lockdown dates and regulations varying by region, some were able to stay where they had been while others had to change location, in some cases even leaving their country of residence. Among the most salient themes were the losses associated with educational disruptions, economic difficulties, feelings of restlessness as lockdowns lengthened, and unknown futures.

The second round of interviews showed many of the same characteristics as the first; however, there was more determination seen to carry on and make the best of things. The best characterization of these interviews is one of resilience.

## Recommendation and Conclusion

Our end goal was to organize the stories from these young adults in a way that would showcase their perspective to anyone reading these stories in the future, both for historical reference and so that their experiences can be learned from. Both the similarities and the differences we uncovered needed to be highlighted. From these various themes we identified one underlying topic: losses of various sorts and the consequent adaptations to them. What was lost varied, from educational to career to recreational opportunities, but every interviewee had lost something in this pandemic. Notably, no one we interviewed was despondent: everyone was continuing to move forward with their lives and make the best of a bad situation. Consequently, we chose this theme as it aptly illustrates the courage shown by young adults as they begin to launch their own futures amidst a global pandemic.

## Acknowledgements

The project team would like to thank anyone who contributed to the project in any way. This is especially true considering the situation we were all put in with having to work remotely on a new project.

We would like to give special thanks to Professors Ingrid Shockey and Uma Kumar for draft revisions, feedback, and general guidance necessary for our success, the WPI Global Lab for giving us a platform to share our work alongside the other COVID19 teams, and our interviewees and survey participants for sharing their stories and perspectives

Finally, we would like to extend thanks to WPI and everyone who worked to transition to the online format allowing us to continue with a project despite the pandemic.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

This project documents the experiences of young adults living through the start of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic began in late December of 2019, when the first cases started appearing in China. Within 3 months, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic (CDC, 2020). In order to slow the spread of the disease, society had to change rapidly: stay at home orders, quarantines, social distancing measures, and supply shortages all became realities.

Young, college-aged adults made dramatic changes and dealt with new realities along with everyone else, but their perspective was often overlooked. In order to redress this and to make sure these young adults' experiences were recorded, we documented their stories during the COVID-19 pandemic through interviews and surveys. To summarize our findings, we identified ideas or rhetoric shared across multiple interviews. We then adapted our research to create a multimedia deliverable to share these stories.

Collecting these stories was important for many reasons. From a historical perspective, collecting these interviews provides a unique look into life during these times, from the impact on the economy and education to the rapidly altered social dynamics. This is especially true for the lives of young adults, whose perspectives may not necessarily be a focus of other efforts to document the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, these young adults are the next generation of leaders, scientists, teachers, and doctors. The perspectives they gain and the opinions they form during this crisis will determine how society moves forward, and how it prepares itself to address future pandemics.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

To frame the background for these stories, we conducted research on the progression of the COVID-19 pandemic and its societal impact. This gave us important context about the underlying circumstances that may have influenced the perspectives of the young adults interviewed. Our research included learning more about media response to the pandemic, actions taken by different countries, and identifying groups of people who were most vulnerable to the virus (CDC, 2020). These circumstances informed the big picture when recording our interviewees' statements.

### 2.1 The Social Transformation From COVID-19

At the time of this writing, March to May 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has required the vast majority of nation states to take emergency measures in order to protect their citizens. The virus had made headlines since January, was declared a pandemic in March, and strained the capacity of hospitals worldwide with the number of incapacitated patients. Lower- and middle-class workers and families were hit hard, with many businesses forced to shut down lay off workers, or both. Lifestyle changes enacted to try and slow the spread have made everyday tasks like social interaction and physical activity very challenging for most people. It is hard to overstate how wide-reaching the pandemic's impact was on life as we knew it (WHO, 2020).

COVID-19 is a novel coronavirus, hereafter often referred to as just "Coronavirus," which may have spread to humans from bats (CDC, 2020). The respiratory illness caused by COVID-19 ranges in severity, with age being the biggest risk factor. In the United States, around 80% of fatalities are individuals older than 65 (CDC, 2020). This age discrepancy was a large focus in early media coverage of the pandemic and is a topic that will be examined further in Section 2.3. Because of the high risk to a significant portion of the population, immediate action was necessary to limit the spread as much as possible. This strategy was termed "flattening the curve," with the curve referring to the number of active cases, as seen in Figure 1.

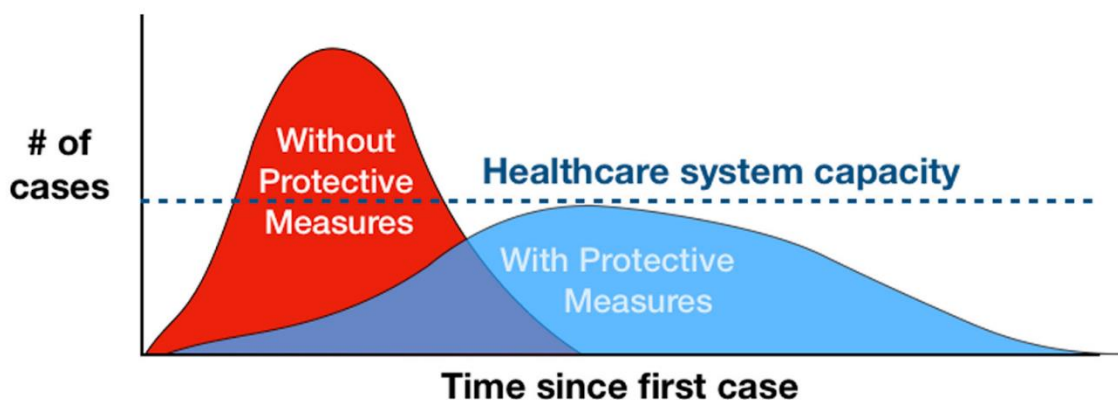


Figure 1: Flattening the Curve (Adapted from CDC / The Economist, 2020)

With the adoption of this approach to aggressively flatten the curve, significant changes arose in sanitation and protective measures, with implications for how we do business and engage in everyday life. The CDC recommended masks, or, at a minimum, cloth face covers in public places to avoid individuals unknowingly spreading the disease (CDC, 2020). Many

businesses or even whole sectors of employment closed temporarily, some required to close by national or local orders. Businesses that remained open took their own measures to protect their workers by implementing precautions such as putting up barriers to separate cashiers from customers and requiring frequent handwashing by employees.

The closure of so many businesses left many working class families without any source of income. In turn, many nations provided stimulus packages, which varied by country: in the United States, the government provided \$1200 for any working citizen under a specified income, plus \$500 for each dependent age sixteen or younger. This meant that many if not most college students were not eligible for economic relief, either as individuals or by counting as a dependent for their parents or guardians (CARES Act, 2020). This has left many college students in the awkward position of having to pay for school and living conditions with no outside income and no help from the government.



*Figure 2: Many small businesses have been hit hard by the coronavirus response (Pymnts, 2020)*

While COVID-19 certainly changed lives medically and economically, it also changed the world in more subtle ways. Social interaction and physical activity were largely restricted throughout the outbreak. These were both aspects of daily life that we see as critical for healthy lives. The loss of these parts of ordinary life so suddenly was a shock. This is a problem that the CDC recognized, specifically dedicating a page of their COVID-19 website to mental health and coping techniques. The experience of a crisis often takes a large toll on individuals, causing even everyday tasks to become difficult and stressful. These mental health difficulties only added to the health risks, financial worries, and general uncertainties that the world dealt with during the pandemic.

## 2.2 Government Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Every country responded to the rapid growth of Coronavirus in its own way, due to the differences in their cultures, social expectations, and systems of government. Here we present some context for our stories by describing the range of actions taken in several countries particularly affected by the virus.

Wuhan, China, where the earliest known COVID-19 cases emerged, is home to 11 million people in Hubei province. For 76 days from January 23 to April 8, Wuhan was under lockdown (Gan, 2020). Furthermore, soon after Wuhan's lockdown commenced, China issued a nation-wide lockdown to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Temperature checks when entering residential areas become commonplace, as seen in Figure 3 (Caro, 2020).



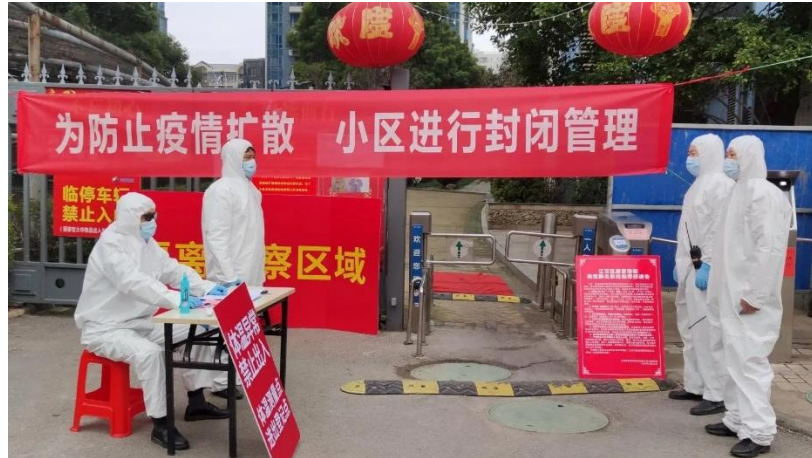


Figure 3: Temperature checkpoint outside of residential area in China (Caro, 2020)

In the United Kingdom, however, the initial strategy to combat COVID-19 relied on an attempt to gain herd immunity. When a novel pathogen enters an unvaccinated population, a large portion will be infected due to the widespread lack of immunity. Once the majority of those in the population have been infected and either recovered or died, those who were never exposed to the sickness are indirectly protected since the pathogen's transmission decreases markedly (College of Physicians of Philadelphia, 2020). Herd immunity has been used as a tactic before in the history of infectious diseases. For example, before the vaccination became widely available, a "chicken pox party" consisted of parents deliberately infecting their children with chicken pox, as children experience less severe symptoms than adults, and can develop their immunity to the pox early in their lives at low risk (Johnson, 2018). Herd immunity to COVID-19 did not prove an effective strategy for the United Kingdom, however, and shortly after this strategy was announced, on March 20, the Prime Minister ordered all pubs, restaurants, gyms, and cinemas to close. The United Kingdom then adopted a lockdown similar to many other countries in hopes of flattening the curve.

The United States, one of the world's largest countries, has dealt with many emerging Coronavirus hotspots, from California and Washington on the West Coast, to hard-hit New York City in the east, to tourist-heavy New Orleans, a southern city which had just celebrated Mardi Gras. By the second week of April 2020 the U.S. had the highest number of known Coronavirus cases in the world, as seen below in Figure 4 (John Hopkins University, 2020).

The variation in infection rates, however, meant that other areas of the country were minimally affected, leading to confrontations about the extent of lockdown and local governance decisions. By late April 2020, the U.S. CDC recommended cloth face covers for those going out in public, and non-essential businesses remained closed in most states as of late April (CDC, 2020). To keep infection rates as low as possible, the government strongly encouraged social distancing, meaning staying at least six feet away from other people, and limited public activities for the summer.



Figure 4: Coronavirus Statistics from John Hopkins University

## 2.3 The Impact of Age

Colleges and universities around the United States began to close down just before or during their spring breaks, in early March 2020. Many students, determined to follow through with their vacation plans, headed to beaches and resorts all over the South. As it was still early in the U.S.'s coronavirus timeline, many did not think twice about visiting crowded beaches. The term 'social distancing' was just starting to make the rounds and many had heard that Coronavirus was no different than the flu, only killing the old and sick. The president had recently assuaged the worries of Americans, saying that "young people, people of good health, and groups of people, just are not strongly affected" (Woodward, 2020).



*Figure 5: President Trump addresses the country on the coronavirus for the first time (CNN, 2020)*

Two weeks later, amidst the widespread closure of bars and beaches, many young people had begun self-quarantining and/or social distancing. However, there were some holdouts, including a soon-infamous Ohio State student who told Reuters, "If I get Corona, I get Corona. At the end of the day I'm not gonna let it stop me from partying" (Brito, 2020). Several news media networks began publishing stories implying that young people as a group were not taking the pandemic seriously (Hirneisen, 2020). This reached a point where WHO released an official warning that millennials were not taking coronavirus seriously (Gunia, 2020). Some millennials replied to this by shifting blame onto Generation Z, claiming this youngest generation was failing to follow social distancing protocols, while they themselves were working from home or unemployed (Hoffower, 2020).

This generational sparring, where blame was laid on younger people, contradicted findings that reckless behavior was not limited to any particular generation. (Pancevski & Meichtry, 2020). Notably, while many were attacking spring breakers for disobeying guidelines, some millennials were concerned that their baby boomer parents were being too careless. Some media outlets began arguing that millennials were more likely to be following social distancing protocols than their parents (Jacobo, 2020). These generational conflicts faded into the background as quarantines settled into place. While people adjusted to the rapid changes brought on by the exponential growth of the coronavirus in the U.S., contention between age groups

seemed to cease. The news cycle brought more important things to cover as the American death toll continued to rise.

While the vast majority of virus deaths were in fact elderly or immunocompromised individuals, more and more stories emerged of young and relatively healthy people succumbing or being hospitalized (Worldometers, 2020). More data showed that prolonged exposure to COVID-19 carriers increases a person's risk of having a serious case, leading to many young and healthy healthcare professionals falling seriously ill (CDC, 2020). As the apparent risks to younger people became more nuanced, generational tensions continued to subside.

Although the portrayal of young people as reckless and uncaring has diminished over the course of this crisis, the perspective of these young people is still rarely being shown in the media, even as these young adults face challenges of their own, from rescinded job offers to canceled graduations to struggles with online learning. As mentioned above, this lack of news coverage is due to the focus on more urgent things, such as the sick and dying. However, this does not mean the perspective of young adults is not important, both as a historical record and to understand the world's future development: hence the need for this project.

## 2.4 Divergent Profiles

As many schools and universities worldwide shut down and evacuated students from their dormitories, some students continued school online. This unexpected turn of events has exposed inequalities among students. College campuses are an equalizer in many ways: students sit together in the same classrooms, live in the same dorm rooms, and have access to the same facilities. Forced to leave campus, this equality has in many ways disappeared.

Tatiana Lathion was a senior and lacrosse player at Haverford College in Pennsylvania. Soon after Haverford closed campus and started online classes, Ms. Lathion started to feel the financial pressure from her family's food truck business, which was struggling due to the pandemic. She was not sure that her family business would survive, nor did she know if her family would have enough savings for this difficult period of time. She considered getting a part time job in a grocery store to improve her family's financial situation. At Haverford, Ms. Lathion had the same opportunities as wealthier classmates due to a full scholarship, yet in the COVID-19 crisis she had to worry about finances and consider taking on extra commitments just to make ends meet (Casey, 2020).

Isabel Canning was a junior, also at Haverford College, and was in the same lacrosse team as Ms. Lathion. As soon as COVID-19 broke out in the area, Ms. Canning's family brought her back to their summer home in Maine for quarantine and social distancing purposes. The family stocked up some masks and gloves since her uncle worked at the family medical distribution business (Casey, 2020). Her situation highlighted how some may be better positioned to deal with this crisis than others, even if they were equals at university.





Figure 6: The different lives between Isabel Canning (left) and Tatiana Lathion (right) during pandemic (Casey, 2020).

Luis Gallardo was a junior majoring in political science at UC Berkeley. Before the Coronavirus outbreak closed the universities, he used to study at the library every night. At the time of writing, late April, he was confined to the small two-bedroom LA apartment that he shared with seven other family members. During the day, he took care of two younger siblings and a younger cousin and helped them with their online coursework. He had an online job, but it ended after a month, so he worried about being able to remain in school and finish his Bachelor's. Gallardo is the first person in his family to go to college and hopes this crisis will not prevent him from being the first to earn a degree (Kolodner, 2020).

These profiles highlight the range of uncertainty faced by young adults in this pandemic. While their risk of succumbing to COVID-19 may be lower than older generations, the far-reaching consequences of this crisis have had an impact, quite often a very negative one, on everyone. Students have had their education disrupted: many struggled with learning from online courses, and in some places, may not have satisfactory Internet access to make online learning an option. Those about to graduate and begin full-time jobs were either uncertain if they will still have a job or confronting the prospect of starting a career without any in-person interaction with their coworkers. Young adults who were essential workers faced the same problems as all other essential workers, having to find a way to continue their job while minimizing potential exposure to the virus. Young furloughed workers may have been even harder hit than older ones, with less savings to fall back upon.

In sum, the COVID-19 pandemic quickly became a multifaceted problem that affected every individual differently. Gathering the stories and perspectives of these individuals gives insight into the problems we faced and how we as humans react and adapt. Young adults are an important demographic in any population, and their perspectives and experiences are valuable.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

The goal of this project was to document the stories and perspectives of young adults during the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic of 2020. To pursue our goal, we identified three essential objectives of this project:

1. Collect and document narratives from young adults (18-24) relating to their experience of the pandemic.
2. Identify shared and changing perspectives in real-time as the pandemic develops.
3. Create a film and/or multimedia platform to document the stories and experiences of young adults during the coronavirus pandemic.

The strategies used to collect our data are outlined in greater detail below.

### 3.1 Collect Narratives from Young Adults Relating to the Pandemic

We identified and subsequently interviewed forty young adults, ten by each member of the project group. For this project, a young adult was defined as someone between 18 and 24 years of age. Due to the difficulties of establishing new connections during the COVID-19 pandemic, the team used samples of convenience to leverage contacts that a team member personally knew. This personal connection made it easier for the interviewee to open up and give detailed answers.

Our range of participants included individuals of varied backgrounds: students from different colleges as well as young people not in college, and individuals of several different states and countries. Within the group of forty, several interviewees were “essential workers” who continued working in lockdowns. About half of the interviewees were WPI students, and around a third came from outside the United States (whether WPI students or not). The vast majority of the interviews were conducted in English; however, a small number were conducted in another language with one of the team members who was fully conversant in that language. These foreign-language interviews, which happened to be all with students, consisted of the same questions, carefully translated to the other language.

Before beginning any interviews, each participant signed a consent form agreeing that their remarks could be recorded. Participants were also asked to state their age, college or occupation, and home state or country. The consent form also noted that their name and contact information will *not* be made public. The consent form can be found in Appendix A. Interviewees could choose to allow the interview to be recorded or instead have the IQP team take notes. As these interviews were conducted in the midst of the pandemic, March through May 2020, all were carried out over video chat (Zoom, Skype, etc.) or audio calls to minimize personal exposure.

The interviews were semi-structured to allow for the interviewee to share their story or perspective as openly as possible, while still allowing for follow-up questions or refocusing back into the scope of the pandemic. Refer to Appendix B for the general layout of the interview questions, and Appendix C for an example of this layout adapted to a foreign language interview with a student. Brief demographic questions helped us catalog and organize our sources without the need to record any names or private information. These questions were followed by the main body of the interview, which consisted of around ten open-ended questions, followed by two to four additional questions depending on whether the interviewee was a student, essential worker,

or furloughed worker. The exact questions asked varied depending on the interview, but all followed this basic structure.

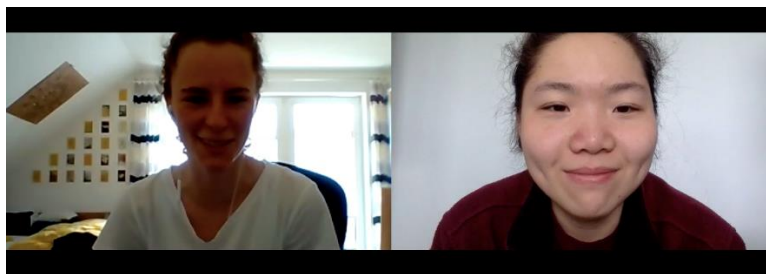
### 3.2 Identify Shared and Changing perspectives

In order to document changing perspectives, each participant was interviewed twice, once near the beginning of April 2020 and once near the end of the month. This allowed for enough time for their answers to subjective questions to change. We designed these questions to capture the full stories of the interviewees, including their predictions and hopes for the future.

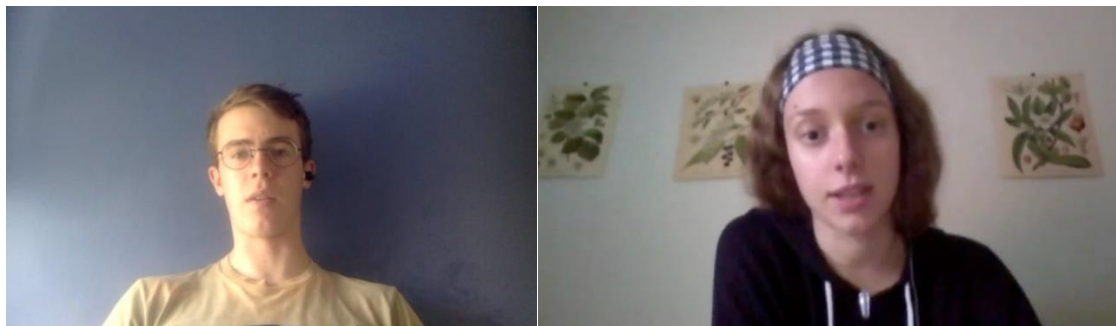
To obtain more quantitative data, participants filled out a brief survey four times, once a week throughout April. This survey, found in Appendix D, consisted primarily of scaled questions from 1 to 10, asking about participants' personal situation as well as their thoughts on the global situation.

### 3.3 Create a Multimedia Platform Deliverable

As a film deliverable proved improbable due to the quality of our interview recordings, our final product was adapted into a multimedia report format. In order to contribute to a greater body of work, this report was worked into an overarching Coronavirus Project Archive sponsored by the WPI Global Lab. Our report included much of the same content we had planned to use in the film, except with additional graphics and writing filling in the space between the recordings of our interviews. The benefits of this option were that it allowed us to include audio from more interviews in an appealing manner. It also made for a good platform through which to catalogue our sources of the progression of their perspectives on the virus, although it proved slightly more derivative of our written report when compared to a film format.



*Figure 7: Zoom interview in session, Interviewee from Germany (left), and team member (right).*



*Figure 8: Interviewees from Maryland (left) and California (right). Compilations of zoom interviews create a collage of young people trapped inside.*

## Chapter 4: Results

The interviews and surveys we collected contributed many interesting stories from young adults all over the world, with many shared patterns in the perspective and rhetoric of our interviewees. Outside of this shared rhetoric, there were several responses which were unique due to the idiosyncrasies of each interviewee's situation. Both the similarities and the differences demonstrate the varying circumstances experienced by young adults in this pandemic.

### 4.1 Objective 1: Collection of Narratives

We collected narratives from thirty-eight young adults ranging in age between 18 and 24, and from countries including China, Denmark, Germany, India, Indonesia, New Zealand, Russia, Sweden, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Those in the U.S. hailed from twelve different states and the District of Columbia. Figures 9 and 10 display these locations.



Figure 9: Countries where interviewees resided during the pandemic

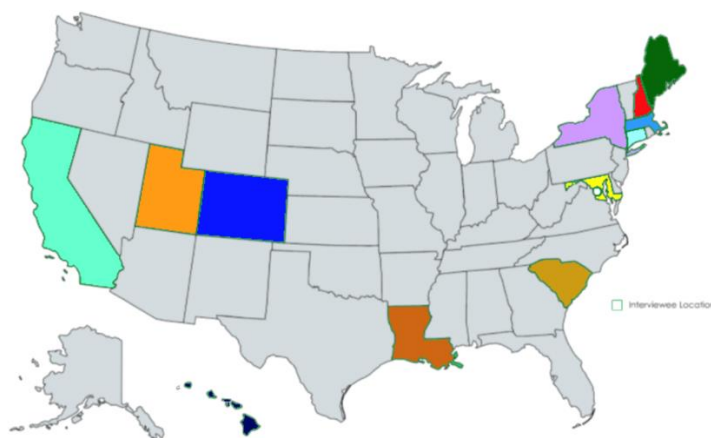


Figure 10: U.S. states (and D.C.) where interviewees resided during the pandemic



The majority of those interviewed were students, while some were employed as essential workers and others were furloughed workers at the time of their interview. Figure 11 shows the breakdown by occupation; as can be seen, the majority of those interviewed were students.

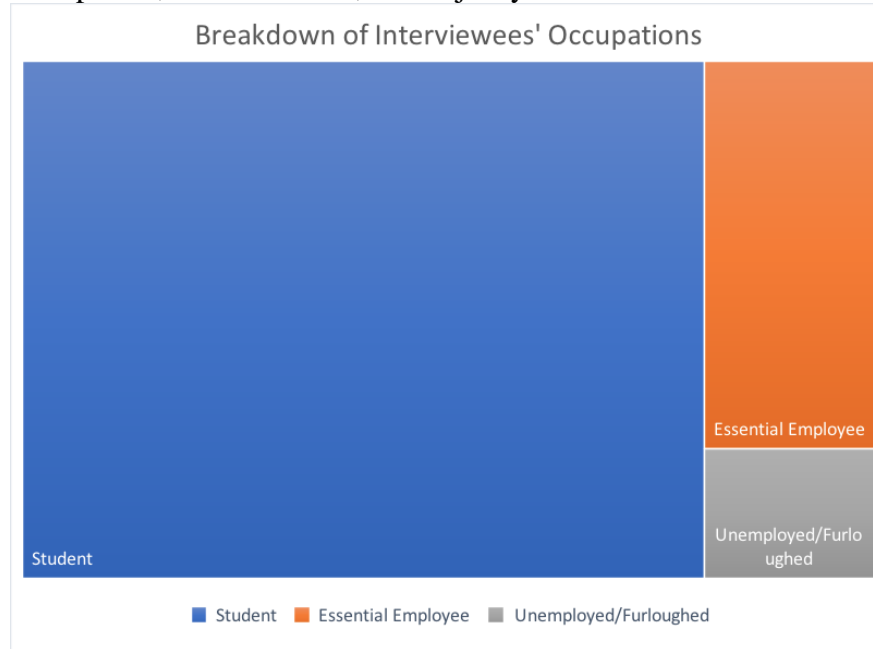


Figure 11: Treemap of interviewees' occupations

The first round of narratives showed many commonalities, highlighting fear, uncertainty, and personal decision-making. Each interviewee had to navigate a variation on the theme. This meant that lockdown dates and regulations dependent on region enabled some to stay where they had been while others had to change location, in some cases even leaving their country of residence. Some snapshots of our interviews are described below.

Jacob, a Master's student at the Imperial College London studying biomedical engineering, continued his in-person classes well into March, consistent with the United Kingdom's initial plan to develop herd immunity instead of practicing social distancing. Jacob said he did not notice the severity of the pandemic at first, with his studies mainly occupying his thoughts. Once the university switched to online classes, Jacob made the decision to temporarily leave the country, as he feared a full lockdown was coming and did not think London would be the safest place to be in a pandemic. He traveled in mid-March to Gothenburg, Sweden, where his girlfriend attends university. Sweden, however, took a very different approach to the pandemic, hoping to achieve herd immunity. The country allowed businesses and schools to remain open and expected its citizens to be responsible in practicing social distancing. However, Jacob reported that during the first week of April bars and restaurants in the city were still crowded, with people packed closely together.

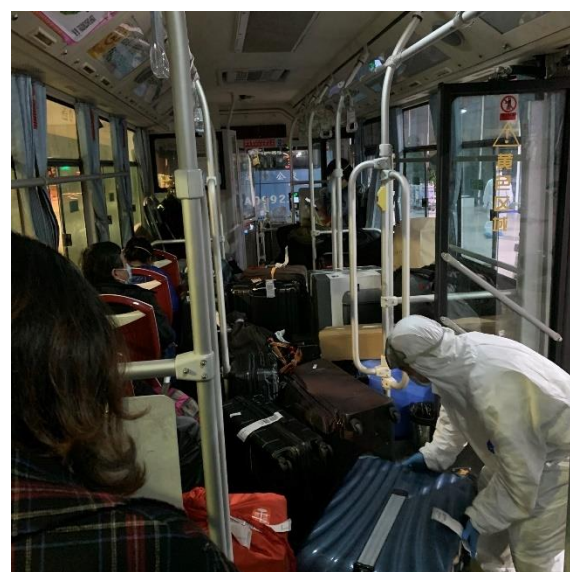
In Massachusetts, Peter was a front-end worker at a supermarket chain. He was asked to continue work during the pandemic as his position was considered essential. He was also a full-time computer science student and, in the week prior to his interview, had to continue his schoolwork online on top of the 42 hours he worked. He observed that “so many people are not putting in hours anymore,” as critical services stores are understaffed. Workers that remained were often putting in six or more hours per day, seven days a week. One thing that has enabled Peter to work these many hours while being a student is that he did not have scheduled online lectures. Instead, lectures were recorded, and he could watch them (and complete the accompanying assignments) on his own time.

Nonetheless, this schedule was difficult for him, and he, like many other essential workers, has shown much resilience in adapting to the situation.

Caro is a Chinese student at Bard College at Simon’s Rock. When Coronavirus started to spread in early March and colleges began moving online, she booked a flight back home to China, believing medical resources would be better there. The process of getting home



*Figure 12: A shopper and cashier both wear masks at Pat’s Farm grocery store (WWNYTV, 2020)*



*Figure 13: Airport worker in a hazmat suit in Fuzhou, China, on March 16, 2020 (Caro, 2020)*

was stressful. She underwent temperature checks before boarding, right after boarding, every few hours on the fifteen-hour flight, and immediately upon exiting the plane. Even after landing in China, she reported, “I had to sit on the plane and wait for hours even though we had already landed, because they were calling about ten people at a time going off the plane to test for COVID-19. Everybody who worked there had a hazmat suit on, and goggles, gloves, and masks,” as shown in Figure 13. Caro was transported to her town’s quarantine facility, even after getting her COVID-19 test result back as negative, where she had to remain for fourteen days before she could see her family. Since returning home, she says she feels “safe.”

While the idiosyncrasies of the 2020 pandemic made it difficult to identify which experiences were common and which were

unusual, there were a few stories shared by interviewees that stood out from the rest. Sam, who lives in Honduras but attends university in the United States, was caught in an interesting situation when he initially chose to stay in the U.S., in case his university resumed in-person classes later in the semester. He changed his mind and decided to return home in mid-March,

only for the Honduran government to cancel all incoming flights, forcing him to remain in the States. At the end of March, a brief window opened for Honduran citizens to reenter the country, which he took advantage of, beginning a 14-day quarantine as soon as he arrived back. Others have not been able to return to home countries at all. Vignesh, an Indian citizen who attends university in the U.S. and whose immediate family lives in the UAE, has not been able to return to the UAE or to India due to their respective lockdowns.

## 4.2 Objective 2: Identify Shared Perspectives in Real-Time

To record viewpoints about the pandemic and similarities in personal experiences, as well as some differences, we kept track of emotional responses in the stories as the pandemic unfolded. This way, we could map the tone of the interviews and surveys alongside a timeline of major global developments, as seen in Figure 14. Quantitative data from surveys is also shown in Figure 14 and mapped alongside the timeline of pandemic events, marked with the green pencil icon in Figure 15. Of course, the qualitative viewpoints and perspectives expressed also require examination. Among the most salient themes were the losses associated with educational disruptions, economic difficulties, growing feelings of restlessness as lockdowns lengthened, and concerns about the future.

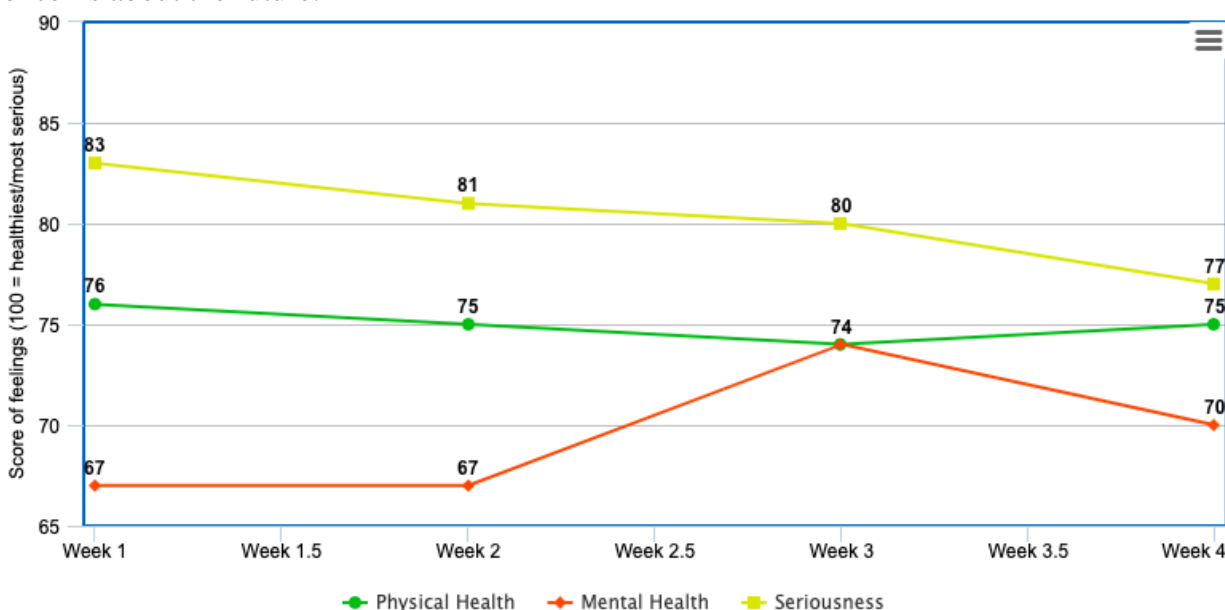
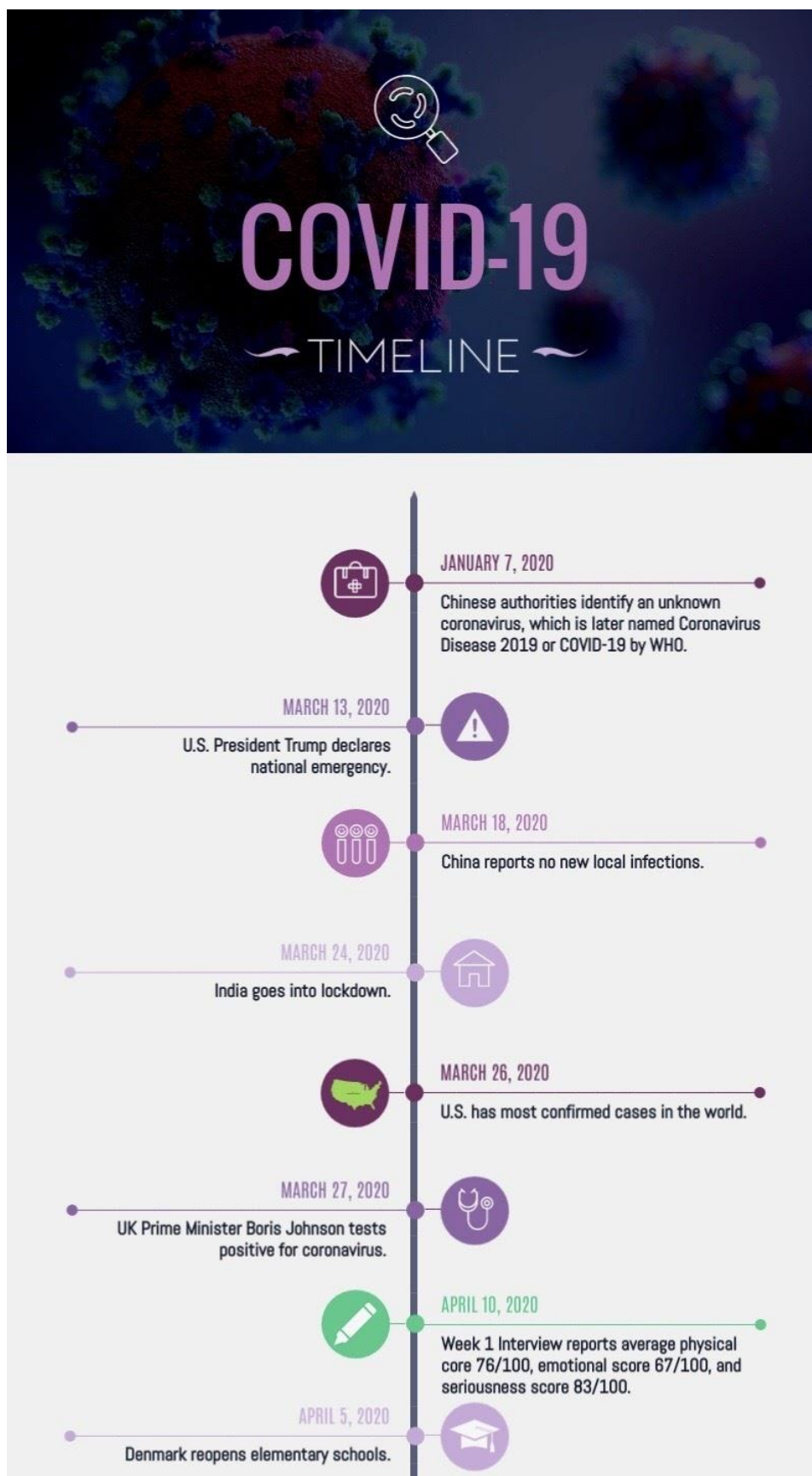


Figure 14: Interviewees' average self-health evaluation and their thoughts on seriousness of COVID-19 each week, on a scale from 0 to 100.



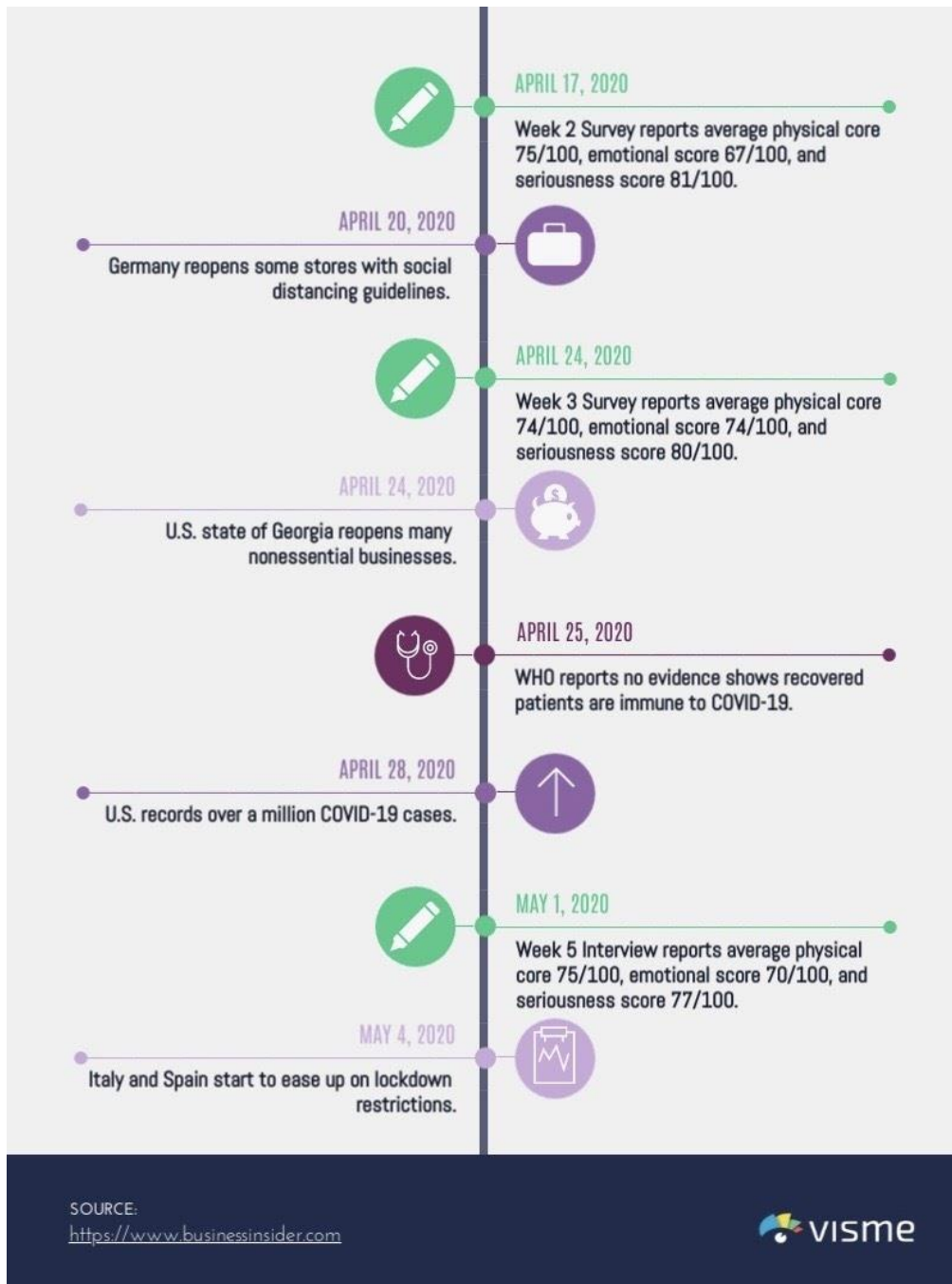


Figure 15: Global timeline of the pandemic alongside our project's timeline

### Educational Disruption

When the pandemic hit, universities in different countries reacted based on their particular circumstances, most halting in-person classes. “My friends had travel plans this year but now they’re all canceled; also, overseas students can’t come to New Zealand because the border is closed and they have to take a gap year,” said Emily, a college student in New Zealand (Interview: Emily, April 2020). Ann, a German student, commented, “The school still doesn’t know what to do for this virus; I think I’ll just lose this whole semester” (Interview: Ann,



April 2020). Both of her universities decided to cancel school until further notice. In other countries such as the U.S. and China, school was still in session but switched to remote learning.

### *Economic Disparities*

While many of our interviewees were dependent students whose parents were able to work from home, we also spoke with individuals living in much more difficult financial situations due to the virus. From children of immigrant families, whose entire households were unemployed, to independent students and workers who had no savings to fall back on, this



Figure 16: People waiting in line for a food bank (Axios, 2020)

pandemic has struck many lower- and middle-class Americans much harder in their wallets than in their lungs. Unemployment has skyrocketed in the United States, and the federal stimulus checks were coming too late for many lining up at food banks to feed their families. On the other hand, some individuals like Charlotte gained financial stability from this crisis. As a full-time independent student

working part-time as a server in a retirement home, Charlotte has racked up a sizable credit card bill since she started college. Since she was considered an essential worker, she was able to maintain a steady income throughout the crisis, and now, with the direct deposit of twelve-hundred dollars courtesy of the federal government, she will be able to fully pay off her credit card bill for the first time in almost three years.

### *Restlessness*

Past the major concerns of finishing education or paying bills, many of our interviewees expressed some form of restlessness due to the quarantine and stay at home orders. A common theme was feeling “trapped in the house” and not having anything to do. Even some who remained employed found themselves with less to do than before. In our interview with a D.C. firefighter, he talked about how there had been a smaller amount of calls than usual. He said, “We normally get two or three engine calls and four or five ambulance calls a day, and now, we get two or three ambulance calls a day and occasionally an engine call.” This particular example could have been due to the sick or injured hesitating to call



Figure 17: Being trapped inside has been causing people to be irritable or restless (Loren's World, 2018)

the ambulance for fear of contracting Coronavirus at a hospital.

### *Futures on Hold*



Figure 18: A virtual graduation of new doctors at UMass Medical School (UMass Medical School, 2020)

When it came to looking forward to the course that life events might take, the majority of interviewees believed that life would begin returning to normal during the summer months. They differed in their beliefs on whether or not things would ever fully return to the way they had been before. Some believed that social interaction would be changed forever, while others predicted that COVID-19 would be nothing more than a distant memory in five years' time.

"Five years? I don't think anyone will be thinking about this at all then" (Interview: Samuel, April 2020).

### *Lack of Coverage*

The scope of much of the media and government's spotlight encompassed the stories of the elderly, the impoverished, and the healthcare workers fighting the virus, and for good reason. However, there were some special challenges that young people faced during this pandemic. Seniors in college had to face the reality that employers greatly reduced hiring during this difficult time, with their graduation ceremonies being delayed or canceled as well. Other college students had to give up on plans for an internship or summer job that would help them pay tuition or progress their career. Young adult workers who were furloughed, meanwhile, lost their source of income.

## **4.3 Objective 3: Create a Multimedia Display**

After the first round of interviews was complete, we assessed whether a film or a multimedia format would better amplify these voices. Since the quality of our Zoom video recordings was not sufficient for a final video, we decided on a multimedia deliverable.

We needed a variety of presentation methods in order to make our project deliverable compelling and to give a more personal feel to the stories being told. We wanted the telling of our stories to be as visual as possible, and consequently incorporated maps of the array of stories we had collected from around the world, screenshots from the video interviews, and themed sections regarding the different categories of the virus's impact on young people. For example, we used a Zoom classroom screen layout as a backdrop for our stories about the student experience. Additionally, time and changing perspectives played an important role in our project, so a timeline was used to illustrate the progression of the virus from when we started taking data and easily show how peoples perspectives developed in real time. Several of these visualizations can be seen as figures in this chapter.

In order to maximize the impact of our multimedia deliverable, we decided to collaborate with the WPI Global Lab. The Global Lab worked with student teams that were addressing research about the pandemic to synthesize a body of work which would be more useful to those



looking back on this time than any one project on its own could be. The focus of our work with them specifically was on the losses faced by young adults in this time, and how they showed both resilience and adaptability in their reactions. This was emphasized on the webpage representing our project on the Global Lab website, which featured quotations from interviewees, photos, graphs, audio and video clips, and sections of this paper to help frame that content. The layout and design of this page was a combined effort of our team and the Global Lab. The final outcome of our work gave a personal glimpse into the lives of young people during the COVID-19 crisis and allowed us to convey their stories in a way both accurate and affecting.

## **4.4 Discussion**

Our end goal was to organize the stories from these young adults in a way that would lend credence to what they had gone through and provide an easy point of understanding for anyone looking back at this time. Both the similarities and the differences we uncovered needed to be highlighted. In order to create something coherent, we took the various themes isolated above and identified one connecting factor: how young adults experienced losses of various sorts and their consequent adaptations to them. What was lost varied, from educational to career to recreational opportunities, but every interviewee had lost something in this pandemic. Notably, no one we interviewed was despondent: everyone was continuing to move forward with their lives and make the best of a bad situation. Consequently, we chose this theme as it aptly illustrates the courage shown by young adults as they begin to launch their own futures amidst a global pandemic.

## Chapter 5: Recommendations and Conclusion

### 5.1 Recommendations

It is important that the story of COVID-19 be accurately documented, not only for future historians and economists, but for the world populace as a whole as we learn from this experience. While some may only look at the death toll or the effects on the market in order to document Coronavirus' impact on people's lives, the everyday stories of the individuals who lived through this strange time will also leave a mark on the future. Some of these experiences have been overshadowed by the weight of the news. Our stories highlight some of the unrecognized hardships during the pandemic, as it took a toll on young people just as they were about to start their lives. To that end, our recommendations at the close of our report are more about giving voice to this generation.

#### *Recommendation to Check Back*

Given the severity of this pandemic and its global consequences, we feel that these stories are just the beginning. What happens next for young people remains to be seen, but we can imagine that this is a formative moment in the lives of this generation. How exactly they recover will greatly impact their lives moving forward. For many, the economic instability brought along by this pandemic will stagger their entrance into the real world. Losses of jobs, internships, and savings due to a frozen economy will stunt the financial stability of young people at a stage when money is already tight, and force many to reconsider or postpone career paths. While we hope that there is an economic recovery in the near future from the time of writing, the fact is that at this point in time the full extent to which this pandemic will impact the lives of young people is not known. Perhaps cases will drop with the heat of the summer and the world economy will return to a relative state of normal by fall 2020. Or, perhaps we are witnessing the beginnings of another recession, and just like the millennials who were entering the workforce in 2008, our generation will be faced with an economy dimming their beginning career prospects. It is important to keep an eye on this group in the coming years because their lives have been so disrupted at a key moment.

Many of these young adults were at the age where they have just started to live their own lives and move out of their parents' homes, and it could be very difficult for them to go back to their parents or guardians and ask them for money. Many who still have to register as independents with the IRS are being passed over by the recent stimulus bill. Students and young people who filed as dependents of their parents in the 2018-19 tax season have not received any funds from the federal government. This leaves those who have recently left the nest even more vulnerable to the current economic crisis. They are a group that has slipped through the cracks in many ways, which is why it is important that their stories are documented for posterity.

#### *Recommendation to Archive Pandemic Stories*

The best way to understand what it was like to live through a historical event is by hearing the stories of those who were actually there. Already, universities as well as media institutions have been collecting and recording stories of individuals living through the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic (Burch, 2020). The National Archives and the Library of Congress have

not yet announced a catalogue of collective stories for this pandemic specifically, but this would be an important record of the human side of the pandemic.

Another advantage of proper historical context is to prevent the severity of the crisis from being over- or under-exaggerated. It is very hard to tell any story objectively, as people filter the story based on their own opinions and preconceptions (Heshmat, 2016). These kinds of interviews enabled the participants to speak for themselves.

### *Recommendations for the WPI Global lab*

To amplify the stories of young people during the COVID-19 crisis, there could be effective methods of collecting these perspectives through projects like this IQP, or to enable young people to personally add their stories to collections. We hope this can be completed through the WPI Global Lab and its Coronavirus Stories Project. We recommend that the Global Lab provides the online resources for individuals to record their own stories and add them to a searchable global database of this experience on the school's server, in addition to its work to preserve and display the findings of these reports.

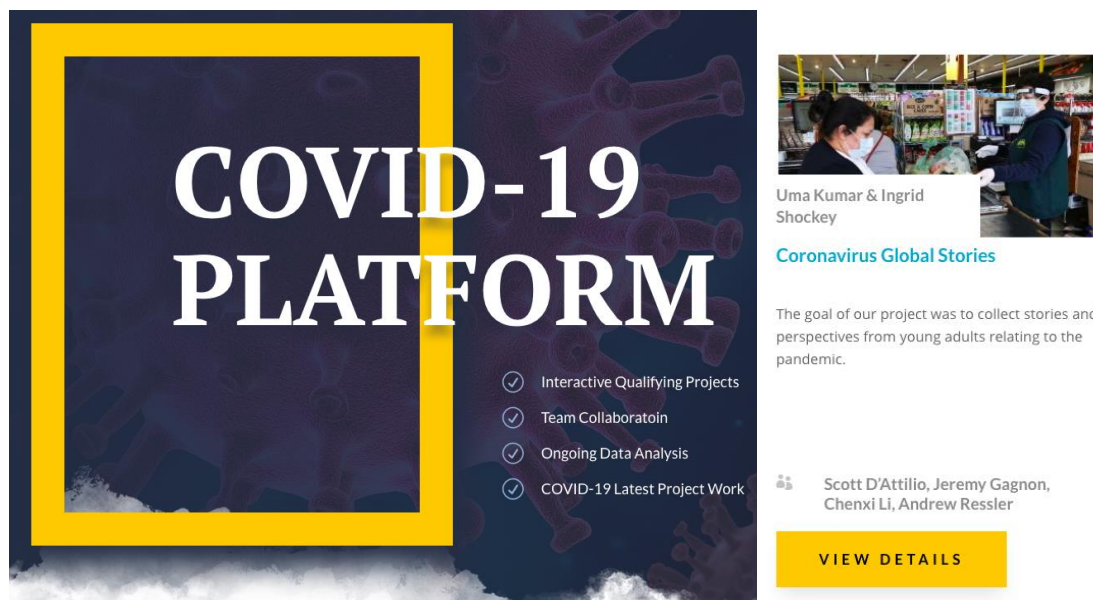


Figure 19: WPI Global Lab COVID-19 Page (<https://global-lab.wpi.edu/new-research-and-projects/covid-19-2/>)

### *Additional Observations*

We want to acknowledge that there were certain limitations to our project. Even though we communicated with a diverse group of young adult interviewees from different occupations and countries, the online interviews did not allow for as open an interview as an in-person setting might have. Additionally, we experienced some technical issues, ranging from unstable Internet connections to trouble navigating the software to inability to record every interview. In general, interacting in person might have allowed us to observe our interviewees' body language and emotions better as they told their stories, lending us a deeper understanding of their experience and what their words meant. However, we hope that the stories provide a snapshot of how loss and adaptation defined this group of young people.

## 5.2 Conclusion

Documenting history through stories is an important way to gain a deeper understanding of the experience. Learning through the lives of others is powerful and can expose certain facets of an era that may otherwise have gone unnoticed. The perspective that groups of people had on a moment in time is extremely valuable in assessing major shifts in culture or global affairs.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in stark changes in our society as we knew it, and it affected almost everyone around the world in one way or another. We have faced relatively few events on this scale, making it a *human* story. We faced this situation together, and we learned that the experience and hardships of individuals or demographics varied quite a lot. We hope that capturing the stories helps to inform lasting solutions for these disparities. The voices of young adults have been largely marginalized during this crisis, but we hope that we have brought an understanding of this group's experiences, feelings, and perspective.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Consent Form for Interview



We are a group of students from Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) in the United States. We are conducting interviews to document the stories and perspectives of young adults during the coronavirus pandemic of 2020. If you are willing to participate in this project, please read and note your preferences on this form. Your name and contact information will not be recorded.

Do we have your permission to use your personal information such as your age, gender, nationality, college or occupation?

Yes ☐ | No ☐

Do we have your permission to audio record your interview?

Yes ☐ | No ☐

Do we have your permission to video record your interview?

Yes ☐ | No ☐

Will you allow us to use your words and image for use on public website platforms?

Yes ☐ | No ☐

I understand that these interviews will be published at WPI for educational purposes and made available to the public. Images and film clips may also be shared to social media platforms including outlets designed to amplify the experiences of COVID-19.

Sign:

Print:

Date:

---

## Appendix B: Sample Interview Questions (English)

### *Demographics:*

What is your age?  
 What is your nationality?  
 What is your occupation?  
 (If student) Which university do you go to?  
 (If employed) Where do you work?  
 Where are you living right now?

### *General Experience Questions:*

How has the experience of this pandemic and associated quarantines/lockdowns been for you?  
 What has been the biggest change in your life?  
 What has surprised you about yourself or about the world?  
 How do your family members and friends view the pandemic?  
 Has your vision or plan for the next five years changed because of this pandemic?  
 What would you like people to know about how your generation has experienced the pandemic?  
 How do you think your generation has been depicted during the outbreak?  
 Do you have a story from this pandemic you'd like to share that stands out?  
 Do you think there will be aspects of society which change permanently due to this pandemic?

### *Questions for Students:*

What has been your institution's response to the rapid growth of COVID-19 ?  
 What are your thoughts on your institution's response?  
 How did you feel about your institution's response at the time as opposed to now?  
 (If taking courses remotely) What has the experience of online classes been like?  
 (If taking courses remotely) Is there anything that is easier or harder when a course is online?

### *Questions for Essential Workers:*

Do you feel at all worried about contracting the virus while at work?  
 Do you believe your employer is taking proper precautions to keep you healthy?  
 How has business changed since the beginning of the outbreak?

### *Questions for Furloughed Workers:*

What hardships have you faced since losing your job?  
 Have you received your stimulus check/when do you believe you will get one?

## **Appendix C: Sample Interview Questions for a Student (German)**

Note that all questions made use of informal pronouns due to the interviewer's previous acquaintance with the interviewee.

Wie alt bist du?

Was ist deine Nationalität?

Was ist deine Beschäftigung?

Bei welcher Universität bist du?

Wo wohnst du in diesem Moment?

Was ist bisher deine Erlebnis mit der Coronavirus Pandemie gewesen?

Was hat sich in deinem Leben am meisten geändert?

Was hat dich in dieser Pandemie am meisten überrascht?

Was ist die Erfahrung deine Generation mit dieser Pandemie im Vergleich mit älteren Menschen?

Wie war ihre Generation dargestellt während diesen Pandemie?

Glaubst du, dass alles wieder normal werden wird?

Wie hat deine Universität auf dieser Lage reagiert und welche Maßnahmen haben sie eingeführt?

Wie findest du diese Maßnahmen? Sind sie hilfreich?

Hat sich deine Meinung geändert?

## **Appendix D: Sample Survey Questions**

How do you feel physically?

Answer on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is the worst and 10 is the best.

How do you feel mentally?

Answer on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is the worst and 10 is the best.

How serious do you think the COVID-19 pandemic is?

Answer on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is not at all serious and 10 is extremely serious.

How has the area in which you're residing changed in the last week due to the pandemic?

(Free response)

How has your perspective on the pandemic changed in the last week?

(Free response)